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Why Driver's Licenses Matter for Undocumented Immigrants

by TED HESSON Sept. 13, 2013

Undocumented immigrants in California will likely have access to driver's licenses after the state Legislature approved a measure late Thursday night.

Gov. Jerry Brown is expected to sign the bill into law. He issued this statement:

"This bill will enable millions of people to get to work safely and legally," Brown said.

"Hopefully, it will send a message to Washington that immigration reform is long past due."

Why are licenses so important? There are a few reasons:

Safety on the Road

I know, this should be obvious. But some people don't see the connection.

It's safer to have licensed drivers than unlicensed drivers. And most states don't allow undocumented immigrants to apply for a license, as we pointed out in July.

Here are some of the stats we cited:

People who were driving with an invalid license, had no known license, or whose license status could not be determined, accounted for 20 percent of fatal crashes from 2001 to 2005, according to "Unlicensed to Kill," a 2008 report by AAA.

That means as many as one out of five fatal crashes could have been related to unlicensed drivers.

Protection From Deportation

The Obama administration says that it focuses on high-priority deportations, but the reality during the president's first term was far different.

In the 2011 fiscal year, more than two out of three deportations were of non-criminals or low-level offenders.

There were more deportations related to traffic violations in the 2011 fiscal year than in the 11 years previous, the Arizona Star reported in October of that year.

The impact of these deportations ripple beyond the individuals being removed from the country.

Just this week, two American children were left in the country without parents when their father, an undocumented immigrant from Nicaragua, was deported. He was taken into custody by immigration authorities in August after he was stopped and found to be driving without a license. Their mother had been deported in 2009.

And not all of these traffic encounters are happenstance.

USA Today reported in February that immigration officials were using routine traffic checkpoints as a way to net undocumented immigrants.

In many parts of the country, a car isn't a luxury, it's a necessity. You need it to go to work, to take your kids to school, to buy groceries. And that leads a lot of people to drive without a license.

The California bill isn't a perfect solution in the eyes of immigrant supporters. The Los Angeles Times reports:

The bill requires a special mark and notation on the licenses, the initials DP (driver's privilege) instead of DL (driver's license). The notation would say the document "does not establish eligibility for employment or public benefit."

Some activists say that notation is "a scarlet letter" that could lead to discrimination against immigrants who carry it.

But the step by California still brings an added layer of protection for undocumented immigrant drivers.

It won't guarantee immunity from deportation, but it gives people some degree of protection, and it should make the roads safer for everyone.

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